

# Diversity Works

An Exploration of the Employment Journeys  
of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour  
Who Experience Disability

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

August 2022

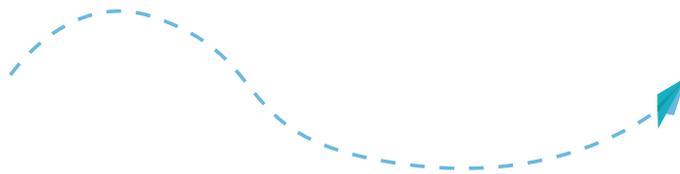
## A NOTE FROM CASE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When the Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE) was invited to submit a proposal to the Workplace Opportunities: Removing Barriers to Equity Program in the summer of 2021, we recognized it as an opportunity to engage in foundational research. We understood (and understand) the need to actively work to dismantle the racism and ablism that impacts and exists within the supported employment sector, and that acts as an additional barrier to Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour who experience disability as they seek out, obtain and maintain meaningful, competitive employment. The Diversity Works Project allowed us to learn with and from BIPOC-D job-seekers, service providers, and employers - now we must take action based on the experiences, insights, and recommendations they have shared. We believe strongly that this is important and ongoing work, and it is in the spirit of beginning that we share this research report from the Diversity Works Project.

In the coming months and years, CASE commits to continuing the work that began with the Diversity Works Project. We are developing learning resources for supported employment service providers about intersectionality and intersectional service delivery based on the findings of the Diversity Works Project. We will be launching a national community of practice and on-line discussion forum in 2023, with dedicated space to continue critical discussions about racism and ablism in the Canadian Labour Market. We will seek out partnership with other community groups and organizations, learning from each other and collaborating in our shared vision of a more equitable and diverse workforce. Perhaps most importantly, we are looking at our own association policies, practices, staff and leadership, and striving to build a CASE team that best represents and serves our members and job-seekers across Canada.

With deep appreciation for the participants and co-researches in the Diversity Works Project and to all who are willing to undertake this important work alongside of us,

Joanna Goode  
Executive Director  
CASE



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last 25 years, the Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE) has worked tirelessly with employment service providers, employers, community allies, and stakeholders to facilitate full participation of Canadians who experience disability in the labour market. Among Canadians aged 15 years and older with a disability, 14.3% are members of a group designated as a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2020). Racialized Canadians experiencing disability often find themselves in precarious work environments despite having the skills and education required to attain and maintain meaningful employment. The challenges racialized Canadians experiencing disability face are unique and require the adoption of an intersectional approach in order to assist them effectively in their employment journey.

With funding from Economic and Social Development Canada, CASE partnered with the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) to conduct a community-based research study in 2021. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black, Indigenous and People of Color experiencing disability (BIPOC-D) at all stages of the employment journey. The findings outlined in this report emerged out of an exploratory research design, and offer a broad picture of the current landscape that will improve our awareness of BIPOC-D job seekers' experiences with employment and related services at the intersection of racism and ableism.

### The Research Process

Findings in this study were obtained through a community-based, mixed methods research design. Between January and July of 2022, we engaged 164 research participants from the following three stakeholder groups: BIPOC-D Job Seekers (N=71), Service Providers (N=68), and Employers (N=25). Each of these stakeholder groups participated in surveys, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews.

Photovoice was also used in the data collection process. Photovoice is an arts-based research method that combines the powers of photography with the explanatory insights of storytelling.

### Report Highlights

Findings from this study shed light on both the barriers BIPOC-D job seekers face and the strategies they use to find and keep work in a racist and ableist labour market. As part of our exploration of strategies, we provide a preliminary picture of the accessibility and quality of supported employment services for BIPOC-D service users. Findings in this summary are organized around 10 key messages that, we hope, will pave the way for future research and action.



**1) BIPOC-D job seekers want an expansive and fluid definition of disability, one that confronts disability as a colonial construct and facilitates a more flexible and empowering understanding of disability.**

The table below provides an overview of the range of disability experiences represented in this study. Most job seekers were experiencing multiple disabilities.

Type of disability	Participants' experiences with disability...
Physical disability	Chronic pain, spinal cord injury, limb amputations, chronic illness
Visual disability	Low vision, progressive vision loss
Hearing disability	Progressive hearing loss
Mental health disability	Substance use, trauma-related, anxiety, depression
Developmental disability	Autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit disorders, motor speech dysfluency, non-verbal learning disability

When asked about the nature of their disability, most participants described their experiences as journeys instead of categories. Participants were in favour of a more social approach; one that confronts disability as a colonial construct and facilitates a more fluid, flexible and empowering understanding of disability.



## 2) BIPOC-D job seekers are juggling precarious work, including multiple or part-time jobs that do not match their education, credentials, or potential.

Most BIPOC-D participants were precariously employed at the time of the study. Experiences of employment precarity captured in our data include:

- ▶ 48% of BIPOC-D survey respondents were working part-time and/or multiple jobs while only one-third were employed full-time
- ▶ 42% of BIPOC-D survey respondents indicated that they were working in jobs that did not reflect their education and training
- ▶ 88% of qualitative participants were working survival jobs that did not match their education and skills
- ▶ A number of qualitative participants described their employment journey as moving between bursts of short-term employment contracts and prolonged periods of unemployment

## 3) BIPOC-D job seekers are managing microaggressions, daily, coded manifestations of racism and/or ableism.

BIPOC-D job seekers unequivocally pointed to racism and ableism as key reasons for their inability to find work. Though the structural impacts of racism and ableism were different for different groups represented under the BIPOC umbrella, all BIPOC-D job seekers described experiencing often coded expressions of racism as well as subtle, daily experiences of microaggression. BIPOC-D experiences of microaggression from employers and/or coworkers included:

- ▶ Comments about their accents
- ▶ “Backhanded compliments” about their ability to speak English
- ▶ Changes in an interviewers’ facial expressions when they realized they are meeting a Person of Colour,
- ▶ The use of derogatory language to describe their credentials
- ▶ Questions about their “fit” for the culture of their company
- ▶ Accusations that they are taking up too much space
- ▶ Assumptions that they are unmotivated and incompetent.

**4) Immigrant job seekers who experience disability are de-professionalized by companies and institutions that devalue the education and skills they obtained outside of Canada. This exclusion is amplified by ableist temporary agencies that push them into low-wage work.**

*"I've been working for several years in my home country. I'm a double graduate, a graduate in commerce and a graduate in law. When I came over here, it was very tough for me ...to get a proper job... I went through these temporary agencies, also the immigrant agencies and they just send me jobs pertaining to labor, which I've never done and I will not do. Because the reason is very simple. I want to put my brains at work."*

(BIPOC-D Job Seeker, Ontario)

The precarious employment journeys of immigrants in our study reflect those of de-professionalized immigrants in Canada more broadly. Many participants, including employers, believed immigrant job seekers were unable to find decent work because government institutions devalued the education and skills they obtained outside of Canada. While being denied access to their profession, participants were also forced into short-term, survival jobs obtained through temporary and immigrant-focused employment agencies. A few immigrant job seekers in our study described temporary and immigrant-focused employment agencies as ableist spaces that privilege non-disabled workers.

**5) Anti-Black racism jeopardizes the professional relationships and dreams of Black job seekers who experience disability, many of whom want to work in places where they can be supported by other Black colleagues.**

The deep roots of anti-Black racism in our institutions highlight the distinct processes of systemic racism that affect Black communities. Black job seekers in our study described the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism in their employment journeys. For example, a significant number of Black participants believe that employers and coworkers perceived them as angry, untrustworthy, and threatening. Many participants described themselves as either the only or one of a few Black employees in most work environments. This isolation from other Black colleagues left some participants longing for opportunities to work with or be mentored by Black managers. A few participants described the devastating impacts of anti-Black racism and ableism. One participant felt traumatized by both her experiences with anti-Black racism and her ongoing battles for accommodation, and like many other participants, she had to give up her professional dreams in exchange for temporary positions that did not reflect her skills and potential.

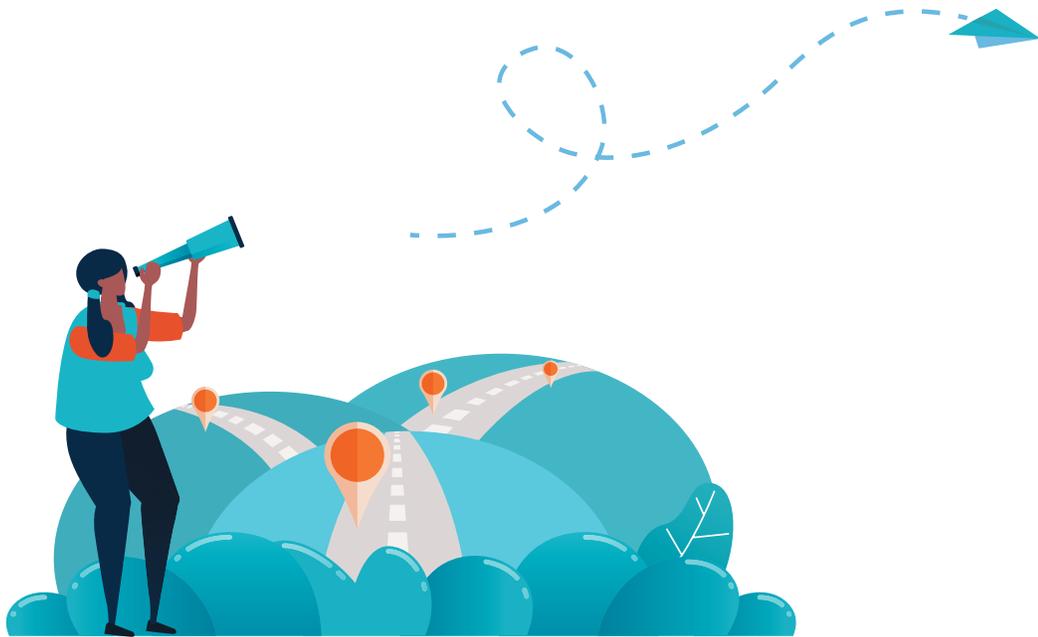


**6) The ongoing challenges of colonialism are preventing Inuit job seekers who experience disability from building communities of care. Inuit participants are advocating for a return to more community-based, decolonized approaches to disability support.**

*"I think it's very important to know that Nunavut was created 20 years ago. Everything we needed was here before that. So it is important we get the services back just like what we had before..."*

(BIPOC-D Job Seeker, Nunavut).

The Inuit employment journey should be contextualized in the ongoing colonial violence facing Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. The accessibility of decent work in Nunavut is complicated by intersecting systems of colonialism and racism that have contributed to Nunavut's mental health crisis, the housing crisis, rising food costs, the lack of trauma-informed services, a broken education system, and the over incarceration of Inuit adults and youth. All participants from Nunavut criticized the uneven distribution of disability resources across regions in Canada, with residents of Nunavut receiving both less funding and less access to government programs. Finally, the Inuit job seeker represented in this study advocated for a return to more community based approaches to disability support; one that is more in-line with Inuit values. He believed that the pathway back to reclaiming communities of care in Nunavut will require an investment in decolonizing systems of support, including the revitalization of Inuit languages.



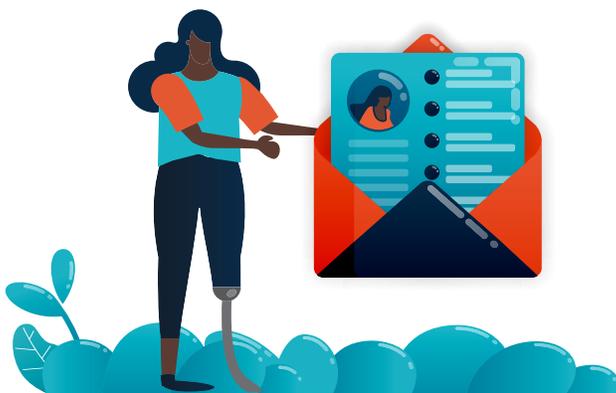
## 7) BIPOC-D job seekers engage in multiple, intersectional strategies to overcome racism and ableism, including code-switching, strategic disclosure, and acts of micro-resistance.

Participants in this study were acutely aware that they must survive in a labour market that privileges young white, non-disabled, and cis-gender workers. Findings in this study document the everyday strategies BIPOC-D job seekers use to navigate this intensely exclusionary landscape. Strategies captured by this study include:

- ▶ Code-switching to convince employers that they can “fit in” at the workplace
- ▶ Performative compliance strategies to build the illusion that they are conforming to white supremacist, non-disabled “rules of delivery and engagement” in the workplace
- ▶ Complex disclosure strategies that shape when and how they present their race and disability to employers and co-workers.

A series of mini-exhibits that capture acts of micro-resistance are presented in the full research report. Micro-resistances are “incremental daily efforts” to challenge forms of privilege (e.g. white privilege), in order to cope with micro-aggressions in the workplace. Acts of micro-resistance presented in this study include:

- ▶ Building support networks
- ▶ Taking space, finding peace, mentally checking out, letting go
- ▶ Critical reflections on capitalism
- ▶ Leaning on resources of resistance.



## 8) Employers invested in Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are focused on recruitment and less committed to retention and promotion.

Employers recruited for this study were invested in principles of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Evidence of this commitment include:

- ▶ 79% of employers believe that their organization encourages EDI in the workplace
- ▶ 74% believe their organization has policies that promote EDI
- ▶ 68% believe they foster a work environment in which BIPOC-D staff can be themselves at work
- ▶ 79% believe employees at their organization can safely report experiences of discrimination
- ▶ 81% of employers felt comfortable talking about racism with their staff
- ▶ 73% felt comfortable talk about disability-related discrimination with their staff
- ▶ 63% of employers indicated that their organization provided EDI training to staff

However, a closer look into their strategies suggests that most employers are investing more resources in improving EDI through recruitment and placing less effort into retention and promotion. For some employers, diversity was the most important step towards inclusion and equity. One participant acknowledged that their organization was successful in building diversity among their ground-level positions but struggled to build diversity among their leadership staff. In her view, the struggle to diversify leadership was linked to 1) the disconnection between

the organization's EDI strategies and Union regulations, and 2) the lack of commitment and diversity on the board of their organization. Finally, all participants agreed that their organization did not have enough resources to accommodate the complex and diverse disability-related needs of staff.



## 9) BIPOC-D job seekers face multiple structural barriers that diminish their access to supported employment services.

Data in this study produced mixed messages about the accessibility of services. In short, service providers who participated in our surveys offered a positive assessment of the accessibility of services while most service providers who participated in interviews and focus groups believed that BIPOC-D job seekers were underserved. Results from our survey tell us that 65% of service providers regularly support BIPOC-D job seekers, and 86% of service providers believe their organization is accessible to BIPOC-D job seekers. However, service providers from our interviews and focus groups felt that the diversity of services users in their organization did not reflect the diversity of job seekers in their region, and that overall BIPOC-D job seekers were underrepresented. When asked to account for this lack of diversity, service providers described challenges and barriers associated with centralized referral systems including:

- ▶ Supported employment organizations do less outreach in BIPOC communities, and as result are less visible in these communities
- ▶ Some BIPOC-D job seekers are not able to produce a SIN number or proof of diagnosis
- ▶ BIPOC-D job seekers hesitate to disclose their disability to government institutions.

A few service providers suggested that the history of racism and colonialism in Canadian institutions has created a relationship of mistrust or disconnection between the service sector and many BIPOC communities, which has led to:

- ▶ A lack of and need for culturally safe, trauma-informed services
- ▶ A lack of racial diversity among leadership in the sector
- ▶ Race-based disparities in diagnosis that prevent BIPOC-D job seekers from getting the support they need.

Forty-three of the 47 job seekers who participated in our focus groups and interviews had never used supported employment services. Most of them were not aware these services existed. BIPOC-D job seekers offered the following explanations for this lack of awareness:

- ▶ Ableism in BIPOC communities
- ▶ A history of seeking support in the community
- ▶ A lack of culturally appropriate services.

## 10) Assessments of Supported Employment Services (SES) are positive overall but there is room to improve support for BIPOC-D job seekers.

In both our survey and qualitative discussions with BIPOC-D job seekers, we asked participants if they had experiences of racism or ableism while using supported employment services. Assessments from BIPOC-D survey participants are mixed:

- ▶ Ten out of 18 survey respondents (56%) indicated that they had experienced racism while using SES
- ▶ 9 survey participants (50%) felt that they were treated differently while using SES because of their race and/or Indigenous identity
- ▶ 11 survey respondents (61%) indicated that they had experienced discrimination related to their disability while using SES
- ▶ 11 respondents (61%) felt that they were treated differently because of their disability
- ▶ 50% of respondents were comfortable talking to SES providers about racism



There were a few BIPOC-D service users in this study who offered rather positive assessments of SES. Findings from our survey with service providers also provided a positive assessment of the quality of services for BIPOC-D job seekers:

- ▶ 85% of service providers perceived their organization as a safe and supportive place for BIPOC-D job seekers
- ▶ 73% of service providers thought that their programs and services adequately address the needs of BIPOC-D job seekers
- ▶ 63% of service providers believed the services at their organization were improving in the direction of equity, diversity and inclusion
- ▶ 77% of service providers felt confident in their ability to support BIPOC-D job seekers/workers
- ▶ 50% of service providers believed their organization provided staff with adequate EDI training

Though assessments of SES organizations and service providers are positive overall, findings from the qualitative data suggests there is still room for improvement. Two key issues were identified through our conversation with services providers: 1) service providers felt unprepared to address racism in the same way that they are prepared to address ableism in the workplace; and 2) unconscious bias and colourblind racism negatively affect service providers' ability to recognize and address racism.

## 11) There is motivation in the SES sector to improve the quality of services for BIPOC-D job seekers.

Across data sets, there is a clear commitment from service providers to improve services for BIPOC-D job seekers. Results from our survey with service providers indicate that 77% of respondents believe that leadership staff at their organization are motivated to improve services for BIPOC-D job seekers, and 64% believe their organization has taken concrete steps towards improvement. Current strategies to improve services include:

- ▶ Strategic partnerships with BIPOC-led organizations
- ▶ Diversity on staff, specifically BIPOC, multilingual service providers
- ▶ Intersectional programs that target issues facing BIPOC communities
- ▶ Re-designing space and resources to reflect BIPOC communities in their region
- ▶ Anti-racism or EDI training, anti-Black racism healing sessions

Most Directors and Managers in our study believe that there is motivation in the SES sector to formally adopt an intersectional approach to service delivery. However, more research and evaluation are needed to inform the development of an intersection model.

*"We're proud of the work that we're doing to become a stronger anti-racism organization... There have been rough times... as an organization have to be prepared to handle it, and it's not going to go as smooth as you think... but it's important work."*

(Service Provider, Atlantic Canada)



## WAY FORWARD

The picture that is presented by these findings is a preliminary one. In broad strokes, it speaks to the experiences of BIPOC-D job seekers with employment and related services as they navigate the complex and powerful barriers erected by the forces of racism, colonialism, and ableism in Canada. The recommendations presented below for the supported employment sector were developed in collaboration with researchers and subject matter experts on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

- 1 Service providers should engage in strategic planning and re-branding processes to assess their internal strengths and identify the gaps that are preventing them from being able to meet the needs of BIPOC-D jobseekers;

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- 2 Service providers' senior management teams must demonstrate a clear commitment to disrupting any imbedded or inherent systemic racism within their organization;

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- 3 An organization's staff team (including governance board and senior management) should reflect the racial backgrounds and varied disabilities experienced by the people the organization serves;

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- 4 Service providers' vision and mission statements must reflect intentional language that addresses the needs of BIPOC-D communities;

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- 5 Service providers' senior management teams should be responsible to assess the skills and capacity of their staff to provide effective employment related services to BIPOC-D populations;

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- 6 Service providers' senior management teams should provide coaching support to their staff if needed when serving members of the BIPOC-D communities;

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- 7 Develop a networking opportunity where employers are invited in to hear about the work of service providers. This can be an opportunity to share strengths and challenges where employers can learn about creating safe and diverse employment opportunities;

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- 8 Invest in internal professional development opportunities that improve outreach and service delivery to BIPOC-D communities;

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- 9** Develop performance goals aimed at increasing organizational and individual team members' knowledge of BIPOC-D communities;
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- I0** Create clear communications about the supportive service that service providers intend to provide to BIPOC-D job seekers;
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- II** Create clear communications for employers about the needs of BIPOC-D job seekers;
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- I2** Develop a plan to engage in and support BIPOC-D community-based activities to create an awareness of their programs, build trust within these communities and meet individuals where they are;
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- I3** Focus on "learning with" rather than "learning from" BIPOC-D job seekers to prevent the retraumatization associated with various forms of oppression;
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- I4** Employ community navigators (an entrusted person from the BIPOC-D community who serves as a "link" between community and service provider) from the BIPOC-D communities, to advise on and support their community engagement activities;
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- I5** Service providers should have understanding of the reality of BIPOC-D job seekers and be committed to supporting this population to reach their full potential and to achieve their end goal of sustained, meaningful employment as opposed to survival employment;
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- I6** When supporting employers to create diverse workforces, service providers should engage in inclusive conversations with employers in order to guide them on a path toward becoming responsive to the varied and specific needs of BIPOC-D job seekers.
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CASE hopes these recommendations will guide the sector to take the crucial first steps in rethinking their organizational practices with regard to racial diversity, equity, and inclusion and to incorporating a racial lens in designing their programs. As an association for supported employment, CASE will continue to provide support to its members in these endeavours.

For more information about the Diversity Works project and to read the full research report, please visit [Diversity Works - CASE \(Canadian Association for Supported Employment\)](#).